

INTRODUCTION:

One of Christian history's most well known figures is Martin Luther, and this morning he is a most appropriate person to shed truth upon the chapter we are about to study.

July 2, 1505, Martin Luther, returning home from a visit with his parents, found himself caught in a violent storm. Utterly terrified, he vowed to become a monk if he were allowed to survive.

Well, he made it through the storm and fulfilled his vow, entering the Augustinian order of monks in Erfurt, Germany. Reflecting on the incident years later, Luther said: "Not freely or desirously did I become a monk, but walled around with the terror and agony of sudden death, I vowed a constrained and necessary vow."

While at the monastery and as a friar at the University of Wittenberg, Luther diligently, even obsessively, performed his religious tasks. He frequently went to confession and dutifully fulfilled the imposed penances.

But all his hard work his confessions, and his penances never seemed enough. Anguished of soul, Luther wrestled with his own salvation. Hungering for acceptance by God, he realised his emptiness. Gnawing inside was the incessant, ravenous truth that his external righteousness wasn't enough: "For however irreproachably I lived as a monk, I felt myself in the presence of God to be a sinner with a most unquiet conscience, nor could I believe that I pleased him with my satisfactions."

On a trip to Rome, which he thought would earn him some form of spiritual merit, he climbed the steps of Pilate's house on his knees. It is suggested by some church historians that this was where Luther first gained a true understanding of the gospel. As he climbed those *stone-hard steps of religious works, a verse came to his mind that changed his life: Romans 1:17, "The righteous man shall live by faith." Like a flash of lightning, the realisation struck him: It is faith that justifies - not works!*

Luther looked back on that revelation as the time of his conversion: "At last I began to understand the justice of God as that by which the just man lives by the gift of God.... The just man shall live by faith.' At this I felt myself to have been born again, and to have entered through open gates into paradise itself."

You see, Luther had lived a rigorously religious life, pounding on heaven's door in the strength of his own works. Exhausted, he fell to his knees before that door and realised a liberating truth: Christ Himself is the door, and it opens to no human effort. Rather, the door swings on the hinges of Christ's righteousness and God's grace - and opens only by faith.

1. CONTRAST: RELIGION AND REGENERATION

There is a world of difference between religion and regeneration. Correction ... there is an eternity difference. Your eternal destiny is at stake ... so listen carefully.

One view of religion, that many people possess, is that God operates by a system similar to weight scales. They think that somehow in the end, all their good deeds will cancel out their bad deeds; if they did more good than bad, then entry to heaven is the reward. This is religion in its most simplest form - and it has successfully kept millions of people in darkness and on their way to hell. Some of you may think like this, and I hope that this message will speak life to you this morning.

Let me show you the contrast between religion and regeneration: Religion is human effort to reach God - our attempt to gain God's favour; regeneration is God's effort to reach us - His demonstration of love based on grace, aside from any merit on our part.

Religion is working hard. Regeneration is giving up my works and believing Jesus' works. The human plan of salvation involves an external series of good works - church attendance, baptism, giving, benevolent deeds. God's plan of salvation is an internal gift from Himself - the impartation of new life by means of a spiritual rebirth.

Luther spent years enmeshed in religious works, but it was not until he came to Christ by faith alone that he experienced regeneration.

2. CONVERSATION: NICODEMUS AND JESUS

"Religious" people are often the most difficult to lead to Christ. They may be brilliant scholars, gifted leaders, or just "good folks," but they can suffer from a blindness that is almost impenetrable. A classic example is found right here in John 3.

A. Credentials (vv. 1,10)

Nicodemus was part of a tight-knit religious brotherhood, called the Pharisees, dedicated to preserving, interpreting, and defending Jewish Law, which they legalistically forced upon the people of Israel. Concerning the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy, these theological hair-splitters devoted sixty-four and a half columns in the Jewish Talmud to Sabbath requirements. They also wrote twenty-four chapters in the Mishnah defining what qualified as work on the Sabbath and what didn't.

Notice Nicodemus' impeccable resume. If heaven could be earned from one's accomplishments, Nicodemus would have had change left over. Look at three salient facts about his background: he was "a man of the Pharisees", "a member of the Jewish ruling council," and "Israel's teacher."

B. Interchange (vv. 2-15)

He was the man of the day. Undoubtedly, his reputation would have been seriously undermined if he were seen with such a renegade as Jesus. So he wrapped himself in the cloak of darkness to steal a few secretive moments with this controversial man - the one who changed water into wine and overturned tables in the temple. Little did Nicodemus realise, however, that when he met with Jesus, he, the teacher of Israel, would be the one raising his hand and asking the questions.

1. THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSION (VV. 2-13)

So the conversation begins with Nicodemus using polite terms, almost flattering words (v.2). But Jesus wasn't moved, He could see right through him (2:24-25) and He went straight to the core of Nicodemus' problem (v.3).

Just as we must experience conception to begin physical human life, so we must experience a rebirth, or conception from above, to begin spiritual, divine life. Jesus says that we need to be born again (the first use of this term in the Bible). You see, the best things I can say about my first birth is that I got physical life, however sin accompanied it. So we need a spiritual rebirth.

But the metaphor catches Nicodemus off-guard (v.4). Some people have presented Nicodemus as an absolute imbecile, some type of fool - however, he was not. Being an older man than Jesus, he was puzzled as to how he could actually be reborn. So Jesus answers using two illustrations - water and wind (v.5-8).

A. Water: Many have been puzzled over what this actually means. There are generally three interpretations.

- One is that it refers to water baptism, however, that would then be salvation of works. One only needs to think of the thief on the cross who didn't have time to be baptised and Jesus said to him, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).
- Another interpretation is that it refers to physical birth, however, that would have been too elementary, too basic for Nicodemus. Without a doubt, if you want to enter the kingdom of heaven, of course you must be physical born first.
- The most sound interpretation is that it refers to the cleansing work of the Spirit when He comes into a person's life. There are three reasons for this interpretation: (1) water was always used in temple ministry to symbolise cleansing; (2) linguistically, in the original Greek, water and Spirit are connected together; (3) Paul gives a parallel interpretation of this in Titus 3:5.

B. Wind: Maybe the wind just blew when Jesus said this and He said, "Look at that! You can't see the wind, you can't control it nor direct it - but you can see the results. It's the same thing with the Spirit - He does a mysterious, unseen work of God in our hearts."

I think it's just amazing. The Spirit of God can be moving right now amongst us and can touch one yearning heart and miss another ignorant heart altogether. I can't see Him, I can't control Him or direct Him, nor can I explain it fully. But praise God, He touched me!

In verses 9-13, Jesus points out why it's such a struggle for Nicodemus to believe: v10 - you do not understand, v11 - you do not accept, v12 - you do not believe. The common problem for all who will not inherit salvation.

2. HISTORICAL ILLUSTRATION (VV. 14-15)

In order to illustrate his point even more clearly, Jesus alludes to a familiar story in Numbers 21:4-9.

- In this story, the Israelites needed only to look with faith at God's provision for their sin to be healed. They weren't told to concoct some remedy, nor to fight the serpents, or to make an offering, or to pray, or even to look to Moses. All that was required was a simple look of faith on what God had provided - just like the thief on the cross, who merely looked to Jesus and said, "Remember me when You come into Your kingdom!" All this was a striking foreshadowing of Christ being lifted up on the cross to save those who were dying of sin and looked to Him in faith.

3. CLARIFICATION: BELIEF AND UNBELIEF (VV. 16-18)

At this point in the conversation, the verse of the most quoted passage in all the Bible appears. God's gift is universal - it is available for all. The emphasis is on the "so much".

There are only two possible responses to Jesus: belief or unbelief. And there are only two possible destinies to which those responses lead: eternal life.., or eternal death.

4. CONCLUSION: LIGHT AND DARKNESS (VV. 19-21)

Verses 19-21 are a theological postscript, with a series of contrasts, explaining why some believe and others don't. It talks of light and dark, the truth and the lie, hating and loving. There is such a difference between the regenerated life and the un-regenerated life. Some people would rather live blindly in the dark cave of their sin, awaiting judgment, than bask, forgiven, in the dawn radiating from the true Light of this world.

What it all boils down to is this: the Son is the solution for the sin problem - reject the Son and you have no other solution. Man, being religious in one way or another, tries to make other solutions and they twist and pervert what God has arranged. Let me show you what I mean.

2 Kings 18:1-5. For 700 years after the brazen snake on a pole was made, the people of Israel were dragging that thing around, worshipping it. It became a little idol along with many others. They had twisted God's provision for sin into their own little idol. Hezekiah, a godly king, smashed it to pieces and called it Nehushtan - worthless, unclean thing.

- What do you drag along with you? Church attendance, baptism, christening, Bible classes and studies, communion. You may speak of these things as though God looks down favourably upon you for doing them, but you are hard-pressed to pinpoint a time when you actually accepted Christ. Don't get me wrong nor misunderstand me - if you are holding onto a baptism or a Bible class for your salvation rather than acceptance of and belief in Jesus Christ, then you are headed down the wrong track. Don't trust in the Nehushtans. Trust in Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Fortunately, there is a happy ending regarding the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus. John 19:38-42 After the crucifixion, Nicodemus was a changed man. He assisted in the burial, fearless and unashamed, in the full light of day. He brainstormed the new birth, and undoubtedly monitored Jesus' life and ministry, and Scripture implies that he came to the conclusion that Jesus is who He says He is.

In conclusion, there is something infinitely better than religion - a relationship with Jesus Christ. If you cannot remember back to a specific time in your life when you consciously accepted Christ as your Saviour, then clear up the matter right now. Give your heart to the Lord Jesus Christ right now. If you ask sincerely, I promise you He will come in.